

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE MONSTROUS

OF GODS AND MONSTERS



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Chapter 12

Finding Bigfoot

The Anthropological Machine and the Generation of Monsters

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From its debut in 2011 to its end in 2018, Animal Planet's least-eponymous show, *Finding Bigfoot*, was one of the most popular programs in the channel's history. *Finding Bigfoot* was a reality show with a simple narrative format: in each episode, a crew of four Bigfoot hunters traveled to an area where encounters with hairy anthropoid monsters have been reported. Once on location, the crew held a public "town-hall"-style event where they solicited reports of Bigfoot sightings from locals. Recounting these personal narratives of sightings was often emotional for the witnesses, who volunteered to publicly relive a particularly traumatic or simply baffling moment of their lives. Tears were not uncommon, nor were sincere requests for an explanation from the investigators.

Following the town hall, episodes proceeded with an investigation in the area where they have received the most sighting reports. This was always a rural or wild setting, and the investigation was often held at night. The investigators had a repertoire of techniques for tracking their quarry, but none was so well known or performative as what the investigators referred to as "doing a call." The style of call varied, but it was usually an extremely loud and drawn-out scream or howl into the darkness around them. Following the call, the investigators huddled in nervous anticipation of the response, and they often seemed to receive one: a scream, a howl, or a moan from somewhere deep in the distance, presumably from a Bigfoot who has been fooled into responding to what it thought was one of its own kind.

For all its modern gadgets, social-media-savvy investigators, and reality show performativity, *Finding Bigfoot* was just the latest expression of a very old and common story: the presence of a hair-covered, human-shaped

monster who resides just on the edge of or far beyond human space, defined in this chapter as a “wild person.” While the program certainly represented a crest of the popularity of Bigfoot-like monsters in the public imagination, it was by no means the first or most popular form of the image.

Bigfoot, our contemporary popular version of the wild person in the United States, is a relatively recent cultural phenomenon, arising in the late 1950s (Coleman 2003). American narratives of encounters with wild people, however, are much older, and can be located with some frequency in sources as early as the colonial period (Arment 2006). As the lens widens, it becomes clear that the image we associate with the word “Bigfoot” is by no means uniquely American or even a modern phenomenon. In terms of cultural, historical, and geographic range, hair-covered and human-shaped monsters are apparently ubiquitous: In Asia, there is the famous Himalayan Yeti, the Almas of Mongolia and Russia, the Yeren of central China, and the Orang-Pandek on the island of Sumatra. The indigenous people of Australia call them Yowie, while Europeans called them Wild Men or Wodewose. The different cultures of South and Central America have the Mapinguary in Brazil, the diminutive Didi in Guyana, and the Ucumar in Argentina and Chile (Sanderson 2006; Forth 2007).

The wild person is clearly not limited to places where proximity to nonhuman primates might inspire the image, nor does it seem bound by any other limits other than the presence of humans to encounter them. I am not the first scholar to recognize the ubiquity of these figures—as the anthropologist Gregory Forth wrote in a 2007 article on the proliferation of wild people across cultures, “western and non-western images of the wildman share many features, thereby suggesting variants of a pan-human archetype likely to find expression independently of individual cultures and histories” (Forth 2007, 262).

At the mention of a possible “pan-human archetype,” it is important to acknowledge that these cross-cultural figures are presented here extracted from their contexts and stripped of the cultural worlds that they inhabit and sustain. There is an inadequacy, and perhaps a futility in trying to draw them all together here. However, I remain drawn to these similar figures *because* they have such various cultural contexts, and *because* these hair-covered and human-shaped monsters seem to step effortlessly between cultural worlds and historical periods as easily as they cross oceans and mountains. Gregory Forth pointed out this very dilemma in his article on the apparent ubiquity of wild people: “It should become clear how cross-cultural evidence and several methodological problems need to be addressed if these resemblances are to be explained” (Forth 2007, 262).

In the chapter that follows, with Forth’s methodological problems in mind, I explore the meaning of the wild person with theoretical and methodological

frameworks from monster theory, religious studies, and anthropology, before turning toward Giorgio Agamben's concept of the "Anthropological Machine" to analyze a specific encounter narrative: the famous Bigfoot encounter of William Roe. This chapter starts with Forth's initial question: why does the image of the wild person occur so frequently across cultures and throughout history? The answer, I suggest, is that wild people are a ubiquitous presence because they trespass an essential boundary in our collective geography of thought. As we will see, it might be *the* essential boundary: the human, and everything else. Narratives of encounters with wild people like Bigfoot disrupt our capacity to distinguish humans from nonhumans, and in doing so, they trouble the essential category of the human.

Is there anything, then, that marks a "wild person" beyond the humanoid body covered in hair? Is there anything that each variety of the wild person mentioned above has in common beyond their shared appearance, which is already quite significant? There is, in fact, a common phenomenology to wild people traditions: the wild person *appears*. Wild people's traditions are constituted in cultural narratives of presence and encounter. As the act of "doing a call" on *Finding Bigfoot* suggests, cultural discourses of wild people reinforce this presence through certain practices, like the retelling of an encounter narrative, or through the solicitation of presence in practices like "doing a call."

Is the interdisciplinary framework of monster theory relevant here? As Jeffrey Kripal has pointed out, monster theory is perfectly suitable for analyzing monsters as a discourse, but its many insights seem to falter when they are pointed toward monsters that appear in the lives of real people. In his 2017 book *Secret Body*, Kripal points out some of the inadequacies of monster theory for looking at monsters that seem to share our world with us:

Enter "monster theory," which looks at the narratives and images of the monster throughout Western history as a kind of recurring deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural and social categories. Here the monster is taken seriously, but only, as far as I can tell, as an unconscious Foucauldian discourse, Derridean deconstruction, or postmodern materialism. . . . And what of real monsters? By "real" I do not mean to point to some future biological taxon. I do not think that we will someday shoot a Sasquatch or net the Loch Ness Monster. By real I mean quite simply "really experienced," I mean "phenomenologically actual." I mean to remind us that many people, including many modern people, have experienced monsters not as "discourses" or as cultural "deconstructions," but as actual incarnate, discarnate, or quasi-incarnate beings. (Kripal 2017, 332–3)

The tension that Kripal points out, between fictional monsters and monsters really present, has not been lost on people who have encountered monsters.

The famous Canadian Bigfoot researcher John Green once quoted a witness as saying: “It’s like you walking down a back alley and bumping into a Frankenstein monster. Everybody knows there’s no such thing, but you’ve just seen him” (Zada 2019, 27). How should scholars treat such monsters really present? Much in the same way that my own discipline, the history of religions, tries to treat claims of religious experience without affirming or denying the ontological status of the divinities in question, I want to accept the basic validity of this experience *as an experience* without affirming or dismissing any ontological stance on the presences in question.

Such an approach requires two presuppositions. First, wild people *appear*: that is, narratives of wild person encounters refer to “really experienced” events. Second, these events and experiences have meaning; indeed, they contain a complex of meaning(s) that can be interpreted. At first glance, these two presuppositions might seem inconsistent, even contradictory. How should a theorist treat an event as “phenomenologically real,” while simultaneously presuming that it represents a discourse that can be interpreted? The history of religions is full of examples. Catholics have long reported apparitional appearances of the Virgin Mary. As Robert Orsi reminds us, these appearances did not suddenly stop as modernity dragged on:

Many times in the past 250 years since Hume’s confident prediction that the gods really present would soon be forgotten, vast crowds have gathered at the places on earth where the Mother of God had appeared, sometimes to single visionaries, at other times to groups of people. (Orsi 2016, 48)

While scholars or scientists might disagree on the ontological status of the events that Orsi describes, these events *do occur*. In Kripal’s terms, Marian apparitions are “phenomenologically actual.” At the same time, her person tells us certain things about cultures in which she appears: it would be difficult to read the appearance of the “Blessed Virgin” without hearing something about cultural attitudes toward sexuality, not to mention things like gender, the status of children, codes of moral purity, and so on. The Blessed Virgin is both a phenomenologically real presence in this world and a tapestry of discourses, of *meanings*, that reveal important cultural patterns in the communities in which she appears.

Orsi’s method in his 2016 book *History and Presence*, alongside Kripal’s articulation of the phenomenological reality of certain monstrous presences, could present a viable approach for the analysis of monsters like wild people in religious studies. In *History and Presence*, Robert Orsi addresses a tendency in religious studies scholarship to derive the category of “religion” from Protestantism. In a field dominated by Protestant historiography and its emphasis on text, symbols, and belief, Orsi points out that the *presence*

of the gods in people's real lives has been ignored in the largely Protestant academic study of religion. Primarily drawing on the history of Catholicism but with reference to other religions of presence, Orsi argues that the gods as immanent, tangible, and visible presences in the world are undeniable in many historical sources, and scholars of religion are obliged to attend to these presences.

Since the beginning of the modern study of religion, scholars have pointed out that people come face to face with gods and monsters in "uncivilized" societies or elsewhere. The Protestant origins of the study of religion looked down on these other traditions, while praising forms and practices that seemed familiar (Kippenberg 2002, 167). But there were exceptions. As Kripal acknowledges, "Historians of religion have long known, at least since Rudolf Otto's still unsurpassed *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), that the experience of horror often functions as a kind of potential or camouflaged numen" (Kripal 2017, 331). The gods appear to human beings, often in terrifying or bizarre forms.

Only recently has the academic study of religion acknowledged that modern people and yes, even some Protestants, have religious lives and worlds in which the gods are present (Orsi 2016, 40). This was not an easy sell: indeed, the very idea of being a "modern" person almost definitionally means living in a world completely bereft and independent of supernatural presences and agents (Orsi 2016, 41; Joesephson-Storm 2017). Nonetheless, gods, supernatural beings, and monsters continue to appear to us. People continue to come face to face with the Blessed Virgin, in her sacred grottoes in Lourdes and in new sites of Marian apparitions. This situation does not require that religious studies scholars assume that the appearance of the Blessed Virgin is "real." It requires an acknowledgment that she is present, that she is *here*, a much more subtle and intimate designation, requiring new methodologies.

Robert Orsi's gods and Jeffrey Kripal's monsters have much in common. Both are constituted *through* encounter, in moments of abundant or overwhelming presence. Like Robert Orsi's gods or the Blessed Virgin, the Kripalian monstrous body is replete with meanings, recalling Jack Halberstam's assertion that monsters themselves are "meaning machines" (Halberstam 1995, 21). Monster theory rightly recognizes the monstrous body as a text waiting to be read and interpreted, and in the act of interpreting the monsters (or gods) we encounter, we interpret the cultural worlds we build and inhabit.

What is demanded of scholars by stories of encounters with monsters like wild people is not another quixotic trip into the woods to "do a call." Rather, it is hermeneutical attention, the analysis of the *meaning* of these encounters. This exact point was made by the Oxford geneticist Bryan Sykes in his 2015 book *The Nature of the Beast*. In the book, Sykes surveyed genetic evidence

for wild people like Bigfoot, which, he initially and gamely hypothesized, might represent relict populations of hominids. Sykes ultimately concluded that there was no genetic evidence for relict hominids, but the work concludes with a frankly stunning admission:

Funnily enough, even though there were no anomalous primates among the hairs I tested, I think my view has altered more in favour of there being “something out there” than the reverse. This change of heart comes from speaking to several people . . . who have nothing to gain but have seen things, in good light while in the company of other witnesses, that are hard to explain otherwise. To automatically reject these accounts is just as blinkered as accepting that every broken branch has been snapped or twisted by a sasquatch. (Sykes, 311)

Rather than genetics, Sykes argues that it is the abundant evidence for the subjective experience of such presences that is the truly worthy object of study. For the geneticist looking at the wild person, it was the repeated narrative of encounter that compelled his attention and ultimately brought on a “change of heart.” With Sykes’s conclusions in mind, let us turn to the interpretation of the wild person directly.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MACHINE

In her 2009 book *The Monkey and the Inkpot*, Carla Nappi considered the cultural roles of wild people in early modern China and central Asia. “Semianthropoid figures have appeared in Chinese literature for most of China’s history,” she noted, and she went on to suggest that these figures occupied an analogous role to Bigfoot in contemporary America. Wild people in both twenty-first-century America and sixteenth-century China provided “a medium for working out social and cultural anxieties[;] the study of humanoid creatures was also a study of the idea of humanity itself” (Nappi 2009, 124). From the perspective of monster theory, monstrous bodies are synthetic representations of thoughts, desires, and anxieties that we would have trouble thinking directly. What monstrous thought, or desire, or anxiety, could be so fundamental that it would arise independently in both twenty-first-century America and sixteenth-century China?

In his lectures at the Collège de France on the abnormal, Michel Foucault describes the monster in terms of transgression, betweenness, and the violation of taxonomies:

The monster is essentially a mixture. It is a mixture of two realms, the animal and the human . . . of two species . . . of two individuals . . . of two sexes . . . of

life and death . . . finally, it is a mixture of forms . . . the transgression of natural limit, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table: this is actually what is involved in monstrosity. (Foucault 2004, 63)

In reading narratives of encounters with wild people, we are looking at a very particular form of monstrous mixture: Lévi-Strauss might say that we are dealing with a monster whose territory lies somewhere between nature and culture, but perhaps more precisely and more symbolically significant, we are dealing with a monster who disrupts the boundary between humans and nonhumans.

Nonhuman primates have posed a problem for philosophy at least since Plato. In *Hippias Major*, Plato quotes Heraclitus saying that the most beautiful ape is hideous when compared to a human, in the same way that the wisest man is an ape before the mind of God (Corbey 2005, 8). Indeed, as an English verb, “ape” refers to a humiliating imitation. Plato is setting up a hierarchy that probably preceded him and would persist long after him. Christian thinkers like Augustine and Albert the Great read Plato alongside the book of Genesis, in which the separate acts of creation clearly reify the sharp boundary between humans and other animals. Through the medieval idea of *scala naturae* or “The Great Chain of Being,” the European understanding of discrete, unchanging animal forms gradually leading to the human explained how similar two species could seem—like a moth and a butterfly—but ultimately, it was discontinuity that ruled the place between the species. The gap, then, between the human and the animal was already quite wide when Descartes planted a flag between the two that has never really been pulled up: humans are rational subjects, while animals are automatons, unfeeling, running on instinct rather than thought, and just as available for exploitation as a vein of iron ore (Corbey 2005, 22).

These centuries of human exceptionalism have been troubled by a mocking semi-anthropoid that the philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “the ape-man.” This ape-man was haunting the Swedish taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus when he wrote, “Surely Descartes never saw an ape” (Agamben 2004, 23). Linnaeus was pointing out the obvious problem with any human/animal binary: when one impartially compares a human being and another primate, the continuity is so obvious that such a binary seems unstable or fragile at the very least, if not outrightly false.

While the distinction between human beings and other animals is not exclusively a “Western” or modern phenomenon, Raymond Corbey notes that the “idiosyncratic, extremely hierarchical character of Western views of apes . . . is brought out more clearly still when these views are compared with views and practice among such non-Western peoples” (Corbey 2005, 30). The Chinese gibbon is traditionally viewed rather highly as an “aristocrat”

among animals, an inspiring link between humans and the rest of the world (Corbey 2005, 31–2). The same distinction remains, but in the history of China the gibbon is actually admired for marking it, and for suggesting continuity, while Europeans derided the ape for signifying human/animal continuity. Here, we can read Corbey alongside Carla Nappi again, who noted that Chinese wild people served the purpose of distinguishing humans and nonhumans by symbolically marking the difference. Europeans tried to sever any hint of continuity between the human and the animal, while early modern Chinese authors valued the possibility of continuity even while they expressed a similar tendency to distinguish the human from everything else.

This fundamental tendency among humans to distinguish themselves from their environment has been a primary theme of twentieth-century cultural anthropology. Edmund Leach summarized the central point of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* project as a prolonged meditation on the various ways in which humans, across the ethnographic record, have dreamed and schemed of an escape hatch from their animality: "Lévi-Strauss' central preoccupation is to explore the dialectical process by which this apotheosis of ourselves as human and godlike and other than animal is formed and re-formed and bent back upon itself" (Leach 1974, 36).

Since Lévi-Strauss, this elaboration of the nature/culture binary has been rightly critiqued and demonstrated to be more of a dense entanglement than anything resembling a neat opposition. Nonetheless, this synthesis of the ethnographic data demonstrates a persistent cross-cultural tendency among human beings to form cultural worlds that insulate them from the Outside: the "natural," the other, the animal. Lévi-Strauss's nature/culture binary, restated by Leach and corrected by a generation of cultural anthropologists, can be reframed and usefully redeployed here in terms of a consistent attempt by humans to *distinguish* themselves within their world. It is of critical importance here to clarify that "the human" itself is not a consistent or universal category. Indeed, following the work of Sylvia Wynter, we can see how certain expressions of the human can "overrepresent" and dominate others. Any local expression of the category requires rigorous scrutiny and contextualization (Wynter 2003).

In his 2002 essay "The Open: Man and Animal," the contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben outlined precisely *why* the distinction between human being and animal seems so aggressively sought out:

It is as if determining the border between human and animal were not just one question among many discussed by philosophers and theologians, scientists and politicians, but rather a fundamental metaphysico-political operation in which alone something like "man" can be decided upon and produced. If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly, then neither man nor

animal—and, perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable. (Agamben 2004, 21)

Agamben argues here that the human/nonhuman distinction is *the* conceptual ground for any further ontological elaboration. Before human beings can conceptualize their world, implement a system of knowledge, or organize themselves into a pattern of belief and behavior called culture, humans must meaningfully distinguish themselves from their environment and the other beings within it. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss's nature/culture binary, this binary distinction is neither total nor is it necessarily oppositional: humans inhabit, interact with, and indeed depend upon nonhumans. Agamben is arguing that their ability to do so rests on a capacity to set themselves apart—conceptually—by creating an artificial category for themselves: the “human.”

Agamben elaborates a theoretical concept for manufacturing the category of the human that he calls “the Anthropological Machine.” “*Homo sapiens*,” he writes, “is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human” (Agamben 2004, 24). Agamben is suggesting here that “the animal” is a concept invented by human beings to define themselves against. For example, the concept of the human, which divides *Homo sapiens* from bonobos with an abyss of difference, while arranging bonobos and giant bivalve clams as categorically the same, is clearly more of a conceptual project than any kind of scientific or philosophically defensible position. Animality is a problem that humans have, against which they must constantly contrast themselves to create themselves.

In a world where Linneaus could simply refer Descartes to a monkey as a refutation of his philosophy, it is clear that humans tend to develop a conceptual grammar of difference to distinguish themselves and thereby generate the category of the human. Descartes was an extreme example, but as Lévi-Strauss's work suggests, there appears to be some version of this conceptual grammar across the ethnographic record. There are side effects to using this grammar, however, flotsam that drifts in the conceptual abyss between the human and the animal, which Agamben identifies as an “ape-man”:

[The anthropological machine] functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man. (Agamben 2004, 37)

By *Homo alalus*, the ape-man, Agamben refers to Ernst Haeckel's hypothesized species of human before the evolution of language, a nonspeaking human. Agamben is suggesting that the creation of a synthetic category

called “human,” which separates us from animals, will necessarily generate its exception. If I might paraphrase Agamben, he suggests that the anthropological machine, when “activated,” will not only generate humans: it also will generate the exception that proves the rule. It will generate humans in the mode of nonhuman. It will generate ideas and images of ape-men. If I might paraphrase Agamben rather aggressively: the anthropological machine will generate humans, but only if the places beyond their homes are haunted by Bigfoot.

As an illustration of some of the theoretical points made above, I would like to turn to a text considered to be among the best-documented Bigfoot encounters. The following is an excerpt from the text of a sworn affidavit signed in 1957 by William Roe in Edmonton, Alberta. On the day of the event, Roe had decided to use his day off from his job on a road-building crew to enjoy a hike in the Canadian woods. He came upon a clearing, where he saw a massive being that he did not recognize: “My first impression was of a huge man, about six feet tall, almost three feet wide, and probably weighing somewhere near three hundred pounds. It was covered from head to foot with dark brown silver-tipped hair. But as it came closer I saw by its breasts that it was female” (Sanderson 2006, 75–8). Being an experienced hunter with his rifle in hand, he crouched and observed the creature:

The thought came to me that if I shot it I would possibly have a specimen of great interest to scientists the world over . . . I levelled my rifle. The creature was still walking rapidly away, again turning its head to look in my direction. I lowered the rifle. Although I have called the creature “it,” I felt now that it was a human being, and I knew I would never forgive myself if I killed it . . . Just as it came to the other patch of brush it threw its head back and made a peculiar noise that seemed to be half laugh and half language, and which I could only describe as a kind of a whinny. Then it walked from the small brush into a stand of lodge-pole pines. I stepped out into the opening and looked across a small ridge just beyond the pine to see if I could see it again. It came out on the ridge a couple of hundred yards away from me, tipped its head back again, and again emitted the only sound I had heard it make, but what this half laugh, half language was meant to convey I do not know. It disappeared then, and I never saw it again. (Sanderson 2006, 75–8)

Agamben can help us understand several strange moments in William Roe’s remarkable affidavit. Roe tells us that it was his feeling that the being before him was somehow human that prompted him to lower his rifle. In the book *Homo Sacer*, Agamben draws on the ancient Greek distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, roughly “noncitizens” and “citizens.” *Zoē* are beings who are excluded from the political sphere, while *bios*

refers to beings who comprise the body politic. As Agamben (1998, 12) puts it: “The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion.” For the ancient Greeks, nonhuman animals like livestock (or the “specimen” that Roe planned to shoot) do not have political rights, and therefore they cannot properly be “murdered,” merely slaughtered as property. Inclusion in the political sphere, *bios*, is the only way to access a “right” to live. William Roe narrates an encounter with a being in transit from *zoē* to *bios* in real time, and he does so by describing his own moral calculation as he leveled and then lowered his rifle: “I would never forgive myself if I killed it.”

The moment of *zoē/bios* transit is a common theme in American Bigfoot encounters, which are often reported by hunters and sportsmen who happen to be armed at the moment of encounter. In Charles B. Pierce’s 1972 dramatic documentary *The Legend of Boggy Creek*, a hunter in the Arkansas bottomlands recalls his thought process during a wild person encounter: “If I’d of had my rifle, I believe I could have knocked him down easy. But I doubt if I would have, cause I kept thinking: there’s just a chance, it might be a man. And if I’d of shot that thing and it turned out to be a man, I’d of had to live with that the rest of my life” (Pierce 1972). Like William Roe, the Arkansas hunter experienced a profound moral oscillation in the presence of the wild person, before ultimately calculating that such a killing might indeed be murder, unbearable to the conscience.

The act of vocalization is another element from William Roe’s account that Agamben illuminates. When it opens its mouth, it does not simply grunt, roar, or growl. It seems to chatter, giggle, mumble: it vocalizes on a register that Roe calls “half language.” There is an implicit yet indecipherable meaning in these vocalizations. Agamben’s analysis of the human/nonhuman threshold intersects precisely with William Roe’s account:

What distinguishes man from animal is language . . . if this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a nonspeaking *man* . . . who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human. The animal-man and the man-animal are two sides of a single fracture, which cannot be mended from either side. (Agamben 2004, 36)

Roe’s wild person (though he calls the wild person “it,” he recognizes her as female) opens her mouth but she does not speak, nor does she simply growl like an animal: she vocalizes her very betweenness, chattering in some unknown pidgin of the human and the nonhuman, her body and voice acting as a momentary bridge in that vast (conceptual) gulf between the human and everything else.

The image of the wild person, in Roe's account and for our analysis here, marks that vast gulf by standing within it, by drawing our nervous attention to the threshold that we have hastily and haphazardly constructed between "us" and the world. In aesthetic terms, the body and voice of Roe's wild person is demarcating the almost-human, "the uncanny valley." The ecological philosopher Timothy Morton directly connects the experience of the uncanny valley to something that Agamben might call an "ape-man" and I have called wild people:

Somewhere in the Uncanny Valley are all the humanoid, hominid, hominin-type beings, beings we define as genetically close to us, or designed to resemble us. The theory runs that we are disturbed by them because they resemble us too closely. . . . Why are they in there? I think the defining characteristic is *ambiguity*. Are they related to me or not? When I look at them, they seem to have recognizable features. . . . And this is what really disturbs me about them: I might have more in common with them than I think I want to. When you start to think in this way, the valley becomes an artefact of anthropocentrism, racism and speciesism—of xenophobia, a fear of the "other," which is, often, really a fear of what we have in common with the "other." (Morton 2018, 174–6)

Our monsters are never distinct from the cultural worlds we inhabit, and any discourse of the "almost human" will incorporate local cultural xenophobias like racism and anti-Semitism, as Morton suggests. William Roe's account is not exempt from this pattern. As he writes, "the shape of this creature's head somewhat resembled a Negro's" (Buhs 2009, 59).¹ Discourses of wild people, in America and elsewhere, frequently encode the local racist, antisemitic, or otherwise bigoted discourses of the cultures in which they occur. Especially in a post-Darwinian episteme, discourses of the "almost human" have been used to subjugate and target vulnerable groups of people. Agamben notes this as well: in his analysis of *Homo alalus*, he concludes that the end result of Haeckel's theory in the history of Europe was not a missing link, but a rampant anti-Semitism:

To move our field of research ahead a few decades, and instead of this innocuous paleontological find [*Homo alalus*, the ape-man] we will have the Jew: that is, the non-man produced within the man . . . the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form. (Agamben 2004, 37)

For Agamben, European discourses of the "man-ape," the almost-man, *Homo alalus*, implicitly justified a "great chain of being" hierarchical structure, one in which antisemitic discourses will later locate Jewish people as "almost"

human. This is not the case in every wild person narrative or tradition: wild person encounters and traditions are as varied as the cultures and histories they occur in, and a wild person tradition in contemporary North America, fascist Germany, or early modern China will not necessarily imbue an “almost human” with the same array of political meanings—but it is a dangerous and common political result of the idea of the “almost human” across cultures and throughout history (Jackson 2020).

I hope that Giorgio Agamben has the chance to read William Roe’s affidavit, since it seems to enclose and disclose so much of his philosophy in just a few stunning paragraphs. To briefly summarize my reading of the body of the wild person: Agamben describes the anthropological machine as a conceptual framework for generating humans and reifying them against everything else. Lévi-Strauss’s work indicates that some version of this basic human/nonhuman conceptual border occurs across cultures. Within this model of human/nonhuman distinction, objects or events in which this threshold is crossed hold particular significance. In our case, the image of a human in the mode of nonhuman, covered in hair, crossing the treeline at the edge of human space, evokes such a dense and generalizable array of meanings that some version of the image has appeared in a wide variety of cultural and historical contexts, wherever the synthetic boundary called “human” puts itself together.

The body of the wild person violates this fundamental distinction, evoking fear and awe in people like William Roe with its distorted shape, recognizably anthropoid yet faintly blurred by a coat of hair, and its voice, a chattering half-language between the roar of an animal and the sentences of *sapiens*. Wild people narratives are not functional, rather, they have a cause: the persistent attempt by different groups of human beings across cultures and throughout history to distinguish themselves from their environment through the elaboration of “the human” as a durable concept, or as Agamben calls it, “the Anthropological Machine.” And the wild person still continues to fulfill itself in analysis: by violating the threshold between the concepts of human and nonhuman, the wild person reveals them to be simply that: concepts.

NOTE

1. This sentence is actually removed from the affidavit text provided in my 2006 reprint (and two other reprints I was able to access) of Ivan T. Sanderson’s *Abominable Snowmen*, and I am grateful to Justin Mullis for pointing out this racist dimension of William Roe’s encounter, which seems to have been deliberately obscured.